Book club in a Bag

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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
My Sister's Keeper

Author: Jodi Picoult

Surname is pronounced "pee- koe;" Born May 19, 1966, in NY; daughter of Myron Michel (a securities analyst) and Jane Ellen (a nursery school director; maiden name, Friend) Picoult; married Timothy Warren van Leer (a technical sales representative), November 18, 1989; children: Kyle Cameron, Jacob Matthew, Samantha Grace.

Name: Jodi Picoult
Born: May 19, 1966 NY
Education: Princeton University, B.A., 1987; Harvard University, M.Ed., 1990.
Addresses: Home: P.O. Box 508, Etna, NH 03750.
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Career:
Allyn & Bacon, Inc., Newton, MA, developmental editor, 1987-88; junior high school teacher of English and creative writing in Concord and Natick, MA, 1989-91; writer, 1991--.

Awards:
New England Book Award Winner for Fiction, New England Booksellers Association, 2003, for her entire body of work; Best Mainstream Fiction Novel designation, Romance Writers of America, 2003, for Second Glance.

Writings:
Songs of the Humpback Whale, Faber & Faber (London, England), 1992.
Harvesting the Heart, Viking (New York, NY), 1994.
Picture Perfect, Putnam (New York, NY), 1995.
Mercy, Putnam (New York, NY), 1996.
The Pact: A Love Story, Morrow (New York, NY), 1998.
Keeping Faith, Morrow (New York, NY), 1999.
Plain Truth, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 2000.
Salem Falls, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 2001.
Perfect Match, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2002.
Second Glance, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2003.
My Sister's Keeper, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2004.
Vanishing Acts, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2005.
The Tenth Circle, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2006.

Media Adaptations:
Picoult's novels *The Pact* and *Plain Truth* were adapted for television and aired on the Lifetime network, 2002 and 2004. *My Sister's Keeper* was optioned by Fine Line Films for theatrical release.

Author: Jodi Picoult (2)

Sidelights:

Since her first success with *Songs of the Humpback Whale* in 1992, novelist Jodi Picoult has produced several other books in quick succession, often working on two books simultaneously. While she did tell an interviewer for the Allen-Unwin Web site that "I moonlight as a writer. My daylight hours are spent with my three children," her writing time has become more constant since her husband chose to be a stay-at-home dad. Picoult's themes center on women's issues, family, and relationships. According to Donna Seaman in *Booklist*, the author is "a writer of high energy and conviction."

Picoult's second work, *Harvesting the Heart*, concerns Paige O'Toole, an Irish Catholic with some artistic talent. The product of an unhappy childhood and adolescence, Paige leaves home after high school and lands a job at a diner where she sketches customers. There she meets her future husband, the egocentric Nicholas Prescott, whom she eventually puts through medical school after his parents disown him. After their first child is born, Paige becomes frustrated with the pressures of motherhood and increasingly estranged from the busy Nicholas. At the end of her patience, she decides to leave her family and seek her own mother, who left her when Paige was only five. Paige's heartwrenching decision leads her to deal with her own identity as she discovers she is not like her irresponsible mother. A happy ending ensues, with Paige returning to her family and Nicholas learning to take on more family responsibilities. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic found that the book had "some good writing, but not enough to sustain a concept-driven and rather old-fashioned story."

After producing *Harvesting the Heart*, Picoult published *Picture Perfect*, a study of wife abuse, and *Mercy*, a story dealing with euthanasia. In 1998 she published *The Pact: A Love Story*, a legal thriller set in a New Hampshire town. The novel concerns the Hartes and the Golds, neighbors and close friends. Their teenaged children, Chris and Emily, who grew up almost as brother and sister, become romantically involved and enter into a suicide pact. However, Chris survives and is charged with murder. After an investigation, he is jailed, and the friendship between the two families dissolves. According to a *Kirkus* Reviews critic, the trial scenes in *The Pact* are "powerful," and the novel itself is "an affecting study of obsession, loss, and some of the more wrenching varieties of guilt." Seaman, writing in *Booklist*, dubbed Picoult's book "a finely honed, commanding, and cathartic drama."

The author's 1999 novel, *Keeping Faith*, also concerns characters in a small town struggling to maintain their concepts of honesty and faith. The protagonist, Mariah White, discovers that her husband has been unfaithful and subsequently sinks into depression. Her seven-year-old daughter, Faith, is upset by her mother's behavior and begins conversing with an imaginary friend, as well as acting as if she has newfound religious powers. Their lives enter a state of increasing upheaval as more and more of the faithful and the curious come to partake of Faith's supposed healing powers. Faith's father sues for custody of the girl, and an emotional court scene ensues. Margaret Flanagan, in *Booklist*, called the novel "a mesmerizing morality play."

Picoult's novel *Plain Truth* is set in the Pennsylvania Amish country. When a dead infant is discovered in the barn of an Amish farmer, a police investigation suggests that the mother is an eighteen-year-old Amish girl and that the baby did not die of natural causes. Although the teen denies responsibility, she is arrested and charged with murder. She is defended by a Philadelphia attorney, Ellie Hathaway, who soon clashes both with the will of her client and with the cultural values of Amish society. In the process of building her client's difficult defense, Ellie discovers more and more about her own inner life and personal values, while also learning to appreciate the values of the "plain people." Many reviewers praised the novel's suspenseful plot, its characterization, and its skillful portrait of Amish culture. *Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service* contributor Linda DuVal said that in *Plain Truth* Picoult writes with "clarity" and "depicts a simple, yet deceptively complex, society of people who share a sense of compassion and the unshakable belief in the goodness of their fellow men and women."

Author: Jodi Picoult (3)

Sidelights: (Continued)

In *My Sister's Keeper*, Picoult uses her characters to explore the ramificiations of cloning and gene replacement therapy, asking whether birthing one child to save the life of another child makes one a good mother—or a very bad one. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic declared that in *My Sister's Keeper* the novelist "vividly evokes the physical and psychic toll a desperately sick child imposes on a family, even a close and loving one." Noting that there are "no easy outcomes in a tale about individual autonomy clashing with a sibling's right to life," the reviewer explained that "Picoult thwarts our expectations in unexpected ways" and dubbed *My Sister's Keeper* "a telling portrait" of a modern American family under stress.

Picoult once noted of her work: "I am particularly concerned with what constitutes the truth—how well we think we know the people we love and the lives we live. I also write about the intricacies of family ties and connections, which often unearth questions that have no easy answers."

Author: Jodi Picoult (4)

Further Reading:

Periodicals:

Booklist, April 1, 1998, Donna Seaman, review of *The Pact: A Love Story*; May 15, 1999, Margaret Flanagan, review of *Keeping Faith*; December 15, 2002, Kristine Huntley, review of *Second Glance*; January 1, 2004, Kristine Huntley, review of *My Sister's Keeper*.

Kirkus Reviews, August 15, 1993, review of *Harvesting the Heart*; March 15, 1998, review of *The Pact*; April 15, 2002, review of *Perfect Match*; January 1, 2003, review of *Second Glance*; January 15, 2004, review of *My Sister's Keeper.*

Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service, June 15, 2000, Linda DuVal, review of *Plain Truth*, p. K239.

Library Journal, May 1, 2002, Nancy Pear, review of *Perfect Match*; February 15, 2003, Diana McRae, review of *Second Glance*; March 15, 2004, Kim Uden Rutter, review of *My Sister's Keeper*.

Publishers Weekly, May 6, 2002, review of *Perfect Match*; February 16, 2004, review of *My Sister's Keeper*.

Online:

Allen-Unwin Web site, http:// www.allen-unwin.com/ (October 2, 2000), interview with Picoult.

Jodi Picoult Web site, http:// www.jodipicoult.com (August 23, 2004).*

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author: Jodi Picoult (5)

Interview With Jodi: From www.jodipicoult.com

A conversation with Jodi Picoult about *My Sister's Keeper*

Your novels are incredibly relevant because they deal with topics that are a part of the national dialogue. Stem cell research and designer babies are issues that the medical community (and the political community) seem to be torn about. Why did you choose this subject for My Sister's Keeper? Did writing this novel change any of your views in this area?

JP: I came about the idea for this novel through the back door of a previous one, *Second Glance*. While researching eugenics for that book, I learned that the American Eugenics Society—the one whose funding dried up in the 1930s when the Nazis began to explore racial hygeine too—used to be housed in Cold Spring Harbor, NY. Guess who occupies the same space, today? The Human Genome Project which many consider "today's eugenics." This was just too much of a coincidence for me, and I started to consider the way this massive, cutting edge science we're on the brink of exploding into was similar and different from the eugenics programs and sterilization laws in America in the 1930s. Once again, you've got science that is only as ethical as the people who are researching and implementing it—and once again, in the wake of such intense scientific advancement, what's falling by the wayside are the emotions involved in the case by case scenarios. I heard about a couple in America that successfully conceived a sibling that was a bone marrow match for his older sister, a girl suffering from a rare form of leukemia. His cord blood cells were given to the sister, who is still (several years later) in remission. But I started to wonder what if she ever, sadly, goes out of remission? Will the boy feel responsible? Will he wonder if the only reason he was born was because his sister was sick? When I started to look more deeply at the family dynamics and how stem cell research might cause an impact, I came up with the story of the Fitzgeralds. I personally am pro stem-cell research - there's too much good it can to do simply dismiss it. However, clearly, it's a slippery slope and sometimes researchers and political candidates get so bogged down in the ethics behind it and the details of the science that they forget completely we're talking about humans with feelings and emotions and hopes and fears like Anna and her family. I believe that we're all going to be forced to think about these issues within a few years so why not first in fiction?

In Jesse, you've done an amazing job of bringing the voice of the "angry young man" alive with irreverent originality. Your ability to transcend gender lines in your writing is seemingly effortless. Is this actually the case, or is writing from a male perspective a difficult thing for you to do?

JP: I have to tell you - writing Jesse is the most fun I've had in a long time. Maybe at heart I've always wanted to be a 17 year old juvenile delinquent but for whatever reason, it was just an absolute lark to take someone with so much anger and hurt inside him and give him voice. It's always more fun to pretend to be someone you aren't, for whatever reason—whether that means male, or thirteen, or neurotic, or suicidal, or any of a dozen other first person narrators I've created. Whenever I try on a male voice - like Jesse's or Campbell's or Brian's - it feels like slipping into a big overcoat. It's comfortable there, and easy to get accustomed to wearing but if I'm not careful, I'll slip and show what I've got on underneath.

On page 190, Jesse observes, while reminiscing on his planned attempt to dig to China, that, "Darkness, you know, is relative." What does this sentiment mean and why did you choose to express it through Jesse, who in some ways is one of the least reflective characters in the novel?

JP: Well, that's exactly why it has to be Jesse who says it! To Jesse, whatever injustices he thinks he's suffered growing up will always pale to the Great Injustice of his sister being sick. He can't win, plain and simple so he doesn't bother to try. When you read Jesse, you think you see exactly what you're getting: a kid who's gone rotten to the core. But I'd argue that in his case, you're dealing with an onion someone whose reality is several layers away from what's on the surface. The question isn't whether Jesse's bad it's what made him that way in

Author: Jodi Picoult (6)

Interview With Jodi: From www.jodipicoult.com (Continued)

the first place and whether that's really who he is, or just a facade he uses to protect a softer self from greater disappointment.

How did you choose which quotes would go at the beginning of each section? Milton, Shakespeare, D.H. Lawrence—are these some of your favorite authors, or did you have other reasons for choosing them?

JP: I suppose I could say that all I ever read are the Masters and that these quotes just popped out of my memory but I'd be lying! The bits I used at the beginning of the sections are ones that I searched for, diligently. I was looking for allusions to fire, flashes, stars—all imagery that might connect a family which is figuratively burning itself out.

Sisterhood, and siblinghood for that matter, is a central concept in this work. Why did you make Isobel and Julia twins? Does this plot point somehow correspond with the co-dependence between Kate and Anna? What did you hope to reveal about sisterhood through this story?

JP: I think there is a relationship between sisters that is unlike other sibling bonds. It's a combination of competition and fierce loyalty, which is certainly evident in both sets of sisters in this book. The reason Izzy and Julia are twins is because they started out as one embryo, before splitting in utero and as they grew their differences became more pronounced. Kate and Anna, too, have genetic connections but unlike Izzy and Julia, aren't able to separate from each other to grow into distinct individuals. I wanted to hold up both examples to the reader, so that they could see the difference between two sisters who started out as one and diverged; and two sisters who started out distinct from each other, and somehow became inextricably tangled.

Anyone who has watched a loved one die (and anyone with a heart in their chest) would be moved by the heartfelt, realistic and moving depiction of sickness and death that is presented in this story. Was it difficult to imagine that scenario? How did you generate the realistic details?

JP: It's always hard to imagine a scenario where a family is dealing with intense grief, because naturally, you can't help but think of your own family going through that sort of hell. When researching the book, I spoke to children who had cancer, as well as their parents—to better capture what it felt like to live day by day, and maintain a positive attitude in spite of the overwhelming specter of what might be just around the corner. To a lesser extent, I also drew on my own experience, as a parent with a child who faced a series of surgeries: when my middle son Jake was 5, he was diagnosed with bilateral cholesteatomas in his ears—benign tumors that will eventually burrow into your brain and kill you, if you don't manage to catch them. He had ten surgeries in three years, and he's tumor free now. Clearly, I wasn't facing the same urgent fears that the mom of a cancer patient faces but it's not hard to remember how trying those hospitalizations were. Every single time I walked beside his gurney into the OR, where I would stay with him while he was anesthetized, I'd think, "Okay, just take my ear; if that keeps him from going through this again." That utter desperation and desire to make him healthy again became the heart of Sara's monologues and is the reason that I cannot hate her for making the decisions she did.

Sara is a complicated character, and readers will probably both criticize and empathize with her. How do you see her role in the story?

JP: Like Nina Frost in *Perfect Match*, Sara's going to generate a bit of controversy, I think. And yet, I adore Nina and I really admire Sara too. I think that she's the easy culprit to blame in this nightmare and yet I would caution the reader not to rush to judgment. As Sara says at the end of the book, it was never a case of choosing one child over the other - it was a case of wanting BOTH. I don't think she meant for Anna to be at the mercy of her sister I think she was only intent on doing what had to be done to keep that family intact. Now that said I don't think she's a perfect mom. She lets Jesse down - although she certainly was focused on more pressing emergencies,

Interview With Jodi: From www.jodipicoult.com (Continued)

it's hard for me to imagine giving up so completely on a child, no matter what. And she's so busy fixating on Kate's shaky future that she loses sight of her family in the here and now—an oversight, of course, that she will wind up regretting forever at the end of the book.

The point of view of young people is integral in your novels. In fact, more wisdom, humor and compassion often comes from them than anywhere else. What do you think adults could stand to learn from children? What is it about children that allows them to get to the truth of things so easily?

JP: Kids are the consummate radar devices for screening lies. They instinctively know when someone isn't being honest, or truthful, and one of the really hard parts about growing up is learning the value of a white lie for them, it's artifice that has to be acquired remember how upset Holden Caulfield got at all the Phonies? Anna sees things the way they are because mentally she's still a kid - in spite of the fact that she's pretty much lost her childhood. The remarkable thing about adolescents, though, that keeps me coming back to them in fiction is that even when they're on the brink of realizing that growing up means compromising and letting go of those ideals, they still hold fast to hope. They may not want to admit to it (witness Jesse!) but they've got it tucked into their back pockets, just in case. It's why teens make such great and complicated narrators.

The ending of *My Sister's Keeper* is surprising and terribly sad. Without giving too much away, can you share why you choose to end the novel this way? Was it your plan from the beginning, or did this develop later on, as you were writing?

JP: *My Sister's Keeper* is the first book one of my own kids has read. Kyle, who's twelve, picked it up and immediately got engrossed in it. The day he finished the book, I found him weeping on the couch. He pushed me away and went up to his room and told me that he really didn't want to see me or talk to me for a while - he was THAT upset. Eventually, when we did sit down to discuss it, he kept asking, "Why? Why did it have to end like that?" The answer I gave him (and you) is this: because this isn't an easy book, and you know from the first page, that there are no easy answers. Medically, this ending was a realistic scenario for the family—and thematically, it was the only way to hammer home to all the characters what's truly important in life. Do I wish it could have had a happy ending? You bet—I even gave a 23rd hour call to a oncology nurse to ask if there was some other way to end the book—but finally, I came to see that if I wanted to be true to the story, this was the right conclusion.

All of your books to date have garnered wonderful press. In what ways, if any, does this change your writing experience?

JP: Um, are you reading the same reviews that I am?!? I'm kidding - well, a little. I've had overwhelmingly good reviews, but I think the bad reviews always stick with you longer, because they sting so much (no matter how many times I tell myself I'm going to ignore them, I read them anyway). I am fortunate to write commercially marketed books that still manage to get review coverage—too often in this industry books are divided by what's reviewed and literary, or what's advertised and commercial. It's incredibly fun to have a starred review in a magazine—photographers come out and take fancy pictures of you, and people are forever seeing your face and a description of your novel when they hang out in doctor's and dentist's waiting rooms. But the best thing about good press is that it makes people who might not otherwise have a clue who you are want to go and pick up your book. I never write a book thinking of reviewers (in fact, if I did, I'd probably just hide under my desk and never type another letter!) but I certainly think about whether it will hold the interest of a reader as well as it's holding my own.

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: My Sister's Keeper

About This Book:

New York Times bestselling author Jodi Picoult is widely acclaimed for her keen insights into the hearts and minds of real people. Now she tells the emotionally riveting story of a family torn apart by conflicting needs and a passionate love that triumphs over human weakness.

Anna is not sick, but she might as well be. By age thirteen, she has undergone countless surgeries, transfusions, and shots so that her older sister, Kate, can somehow fight the leukemia that has plagued her since childhood. The product of preimplantation genetic diagnosis, Anna was conceived as a bone marrow match for Kate—a life and a role that she has never challenged...until now. Like most teenagers, Anna is beginning to question who she truly is. But unlike most teenagers, she has always been defined in terms of her sister—and so Anna makes a decision that for most would be unthinkable, a decision that will tear her family apart and have perhaps fatal consequences for the sister she loves.

My Sister's Keeper examines what it means to be a good parent, a good sister, a good person. Is it morally correct to do whatever it takes to save a child's life, even if that means infringing upon the rights of another? Is it worth trying to discover who you really are, if that quest makes you like yourself less? Should you follow your own heart, or let others lead you? Once again, in *My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult tackles a controversial real-life subject with grace, wisdom, and sensitivity.

Discussion Questions:

Reading Guide from: Readinggroupguides.com

1. One of this novel's strengths is the way it skillfully demonstrates the subjectivity people bring to their interactions with others. The motivations of individual characters, the emotions that pull them one way or another, and the personal feelings that they inject into professional situations becomes achingly clear as we explore many different viewpoints. For example, despite Julia and Campbell's attempts to remain calm, unemotional and businesslike when they deal with one another, the past keeps seeping in, clouding their interaction. The same goes for the interaction between Sara and Anna during the trial. Is there such a thing as an objective decision in the world of this story? Is anyone capable of being totally rational, or do emotions always come into play?

2. What do you think of this story's representation of the justice system? What was your opinion of the final outcome of the trial?

3. What is your opinion of Sara? With her life focused on saving Kate, she sometimes neglects her other children. Jesse is rapidly becoming a juvenile delinquent, and Anna is invisible—a fact that the little girl knows only too well. What does this say about Sara's role as a mother? What would you have done in her shoes? Has she unwittingly forgotten Jesse and Anna, or do you think she has consciously chosen to neglect them—either as an attempt to save a little energy for herself, or as some kind of punishment? Does Sara resent her other children for being healthy? Did you find yourself criticizing Sara, empathizing with her, or both?

4. During a conversation about Kate, Zanne tells Sara, "No one has to be a martyr 24/7." When she mistakenly hears the word "mother" not "martyr" and is corrected by Zanne, Sara smiles and asks, "Is there a difference?" In what ways does this moment provide insight into Sara's state of mind? Do you think it strange that she sees no difference between motherhood and martyrhood?

Discussion Questions (Continued):

5. Campbell is certainly a fascinating character: guarded, intelligent, caring and yet selfish at the same time. Due to these seemingly contradictory traits, it can be difficult to figure him out. As he himself admits, "motivations are not what they seem to be." At one point he states, "Out of necessity—medical and emotional—I have gotten rather skilled at being an escape artist." Why do you think Campbell feels that he needs to hide his illness? Is it significant that Anna is the first to break down his barriers and hear the truth? Why, for example, does he flippantly dismiss all questions regarding Judge with sarcastic remarks?

6. At one point, Campbell thinks to himself: "There are two reasons not to tell the truth—because lying will get you what you want, and because lying will keep someone from getting hurt." With this kind of thinking, Campbell gives himself an amazingly wide berth; he effectively frees himself from speaking any semblance of the truth as long as the lie will somehow benefit himself or anyone else. Did it concern you that a lawyer would express an opinion like this? Do you think, by the end of the story, that Campbell still thinks this moral flexibility is okay? In what ways might this kind of thinking actually wind up hurting Campbell?

7. It is interesting that Campbell suffers seizures that only his dog can foresee. How might this unique relationship mirror some of the relationships between humans in this novel? In what ways does Judge introduce important ideas about loyalty and instinct?

8. On page 149, Brian is talking to Julia about astronomy and says, "Dark matter has a gravitational effect on other objects. You can't see it, you can't feel it, but you can watch something being pulled in its direction." How is this symbolic of Kate's illness? What might be a possible reason for Brian's fascination with astronomy?

9. Near the end of the novel, Anna describes "Ifspeak"—the language that all children know, but abandon as they grow older—remarking that "Kids think with their brains cracked wide open; becoming an adult, I've decided, is only a slow sewing shut." Do you believe this to be true? What might children teach the adults in this novel? Which adults need lessons most?

10. "It's more like we're astronauts, each wearing a separate helmet, each sustained by our own source of air." This quote comes from Anna, as she and her parents sit in silence in the hospital cafeteria. Besides being a powerful image of the family members' isolation, this observation shows Anna to be one of the wisest, most perceptive characters in this novel. Discuss the alienation affecting these characters. While it is obvious that Anna's decision to sue her parents increases that sense of alienation throughout the novel (especially for Anna herself), do you think that she has permanently harmed the family dynamic?

11. During the trial, when Dr. Campbell takes the stand, he describes the rules by which the medical ethics committee, of which he is a part, rules their cases. Out of these six principles (autonomy, veracity, fidelity, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice), which apply to Anna's lawsuit? Moreover, which of these should be applied to Anna's home situation? In other words, do you think a parent might have anything to learn from the guidelines that the doctors follow? Are there family ethics that ought to be put into place to ensure positive family dynamics? I so, what should they be?

12. Early in the legal proceedings, Anna makes a striking observation as she watches her mother slip back into her lawyer role, noting, "It is hard to believe that my mother used to do this for a living. She used to be someone else, once. I suppose we all were." Discuss the concept of change as it is presented in this story. While most of the characters seem to undergo a metamorphosis of sorts—either emotionally or even physically (in the case of Kate), some seem more adept at it than others. Who do you think is ultimately the most capable of undergoing change and why?

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

13. Discuss the symbolic role that Jesse's pyromania plays in this novel, keeping in mind the following quote from Brian: "How does someone go from thinking that if he cannot rescue, he must destroy?" Why is it significant that Jesse has, in many respects, become the polar opposite of his father? But despite this, why is Jesse often finding himself in the reluctant hero position (saving Rat, delivering the baby at boot camp)? Brian himself comes to realize, in the scene where he confronts Jesse, that he and his son aren't so different. Talk about the traits that they share and the new understanding that they gain for each other by the end of the story.

14. *My Sister's Keeper* explores the moral, practical and emotional complications of putting one human being in pain or in danger for the well being of another. Discuss the different kinds of ethical problems that Anna, as the "designer baby," presents in this story? Did your view change as the story progressed? Why or why not? Has this novel changed any of your opinions about other conflicts in bioethics like stem cell research or genetically manipulated offspring?

Book: My Sisters's Keeper

Discussion Questions: From Jodi:

1. Reread the prologue to *My Sister's Keeper*. Who is the speaker? Is it the same person you thought it was the first time you read it?

2. What is the metaphorical relevance of Brian's profession as a fire chief?

3. Why is Jesse's behavior so aberrant, while until now, Anna has been so compliant?

4. What might be a possible reason for Brian's fascination with astronomy?

5. On page 98, Kate is being admitted to the hospital in very serious condition. She mouths to Jesse, "tell Anna," but is unable to finish. What do you think she was trying to say?

6. On page 122, Julia says, "Even if the law says that no one is responsible for anyone else, helping someone who needs it is the right thing to do." Who understood better how to "help" Kate, Sara or Anna?

7. Did Anna do the right thing, honoring Kate's wishes?

8. Do you feel it was unfair of Kate to ask Anna to refuse to donate a kidney, even though this seemed to be the only way for her to avoid the lifesaving transplant?

9. On page 142, Brian says that when rescuing someone from a fire, that "the safety of the rescuer is of a higher priority than the safety of the victim. Always." How does this apply to his role in his own family?

10. On page 144, Brian says, "Like anything that's been confined, fire has a natural instinct to escape." How does this truth apply to Kate? to Brian himself?

11. On page 149, Brian is talking to Julia about astronomy and says, "Dark matter has a gravitational effect on other objects. You can't see it, you can't feel it, but you can watch something being pulled in its direction." How is this symbolic of Kate's illness?

12. For what reason(s) did Brian offer Anna a place to stay at the firehouse while the legal proceedings were underway?

13. How does Anna's decision to pursue medical emancipation parallel Campbell's decision to end his relationship with Julia after his accident?

14. Do you agree with Brian's decision not to turn Jesse in to the authorities for setting the fires?

15. Do you feel that it's ethical to conceive a child that meets specific genetic requirements?

16. If not, do you believe that there should be specific exceptions, such as the purpose of saving another person's life, or is this just a "slippery slope?"

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
My Sister's Keeper

Reviews:

/*Starred Review*/ Expect to be kept up all night by Picoult's latest novel, but it's much more than a page-turner; it's a fascinating character study framed by a complex, gripping story. Thirteen-year-old Anna Fitzgerald walks into the office of lawyer Campbell Alexander and announces she wants to sue her parents for the rights to her own body. Anna was conceived after her older sister, Kate, developed a rare form of leukemia at the age of two, and has donated bone marrow and blood to her sister. Now she has been asked to donate a kidney, and she intends to refuse. Campbell is a jaded young man who nevertheless decides to take her case pro bono. Anna's parents are shocked when they learn of her lawsuit, and her mother, a former civil defense attorney, decides to represent them. Anna refuses to budge on her position despite the fact that she clearly loves her sister and longs for her family's happiness. As the gripping court case builds, the story takes a shocking turn. Told in alternating perspectives by the engaging, fascinating cast of characters, Picoult's novel grabs the reader from the first page and never lets go. This is a beautiful, heartbreaking, controversial, and honest book.

-- Kristine Huntley (*Booklist*, 01-01-2004, p790)

School Library Journal Review: Adult/High School Anna was genetically engineered to be a perfect match for her cancer-ridden older sister. Since birth, the 13-year-old has donated platelets, blood, her umbilical cord, and bone marrow as part of her family's struggle to lengthen Kate's life. Anna is now being considered as a kidney donor in a last-ditch attempt to save her 16-year-old sister. As this compelling story opens, Anna has hired a lawyer to represent her in a medical emancipation suit to allow her to have control over her own body. Picoult skillfully relates the ensuing drama from the points of view of the parents; Anna; Cambell, the self-absorbed lawyer; Julia, the court-appointed guardian ad litem; and Jesse, the troubled oldest child in the family. Everyone's quandary is explicated and each of the characters is fully developed. There seems to be no easy answer, and readers are likely to be sympathetic to all sides of the case. This is a real page-turner and frighteningly thought-provoking. The story shows evidence of thorough research and the unexpected twist at the end will surprise almost everyone. The novel does not answer many questions, but it sure raises some and will have teens thinking about possible answers long after they have finished the book. Susan H. Woodcock, Fairfax County Public Library, Chantilly, VA --Susan H. Woodcock (Reviewed January 1, 2005) (*School Library Journal,* vol 51, issue 1, p159)

Publishers Weekly Review: The difficult choices a family must make when a child is diagnosed with a serious disease are explored with pathos and understanding in this 11th novel by Picoult (*Second Glance*, etc.). The author, who has taken on such controversial subjects as euthanasia (*Mercy*), teen suicide (*The Pact*) and sterilization laws (*Second Glance*), turns her gaze on genetic planning, the prospect of creating babies for health purposes and the ethical and moral fallout that results. Kate Fitzgerald has a rare form of leukemia. Her sister, Anna, was conceived to provide a donor match for procedures that become increasingly invasive. At 13, Anna hires a lawyer so that she can sue her parents for the right to make her own decisions about how her body is used when a kidney transplant is planned. Meanwhile, Jesse, the neglected oldest child of the family, is out setting fires, which his firefighter father, Brian, inevitably puts out. Picoult uses multiple viewpoints to reveal each character's intentions and observations, but she doesn't manage her transitions as gracefully as usual; a series of flashbacks are abrupt. Nor is Sara, the children's mother, as well developed and three-dimensional as previous Picoult protagonists. Her devotion to Kate is understandable, but her complete lack of sympathy for Anna's predicament until the trial does not ring true, nor can we buy that Sara would dust off her law degree and represent herself in such a complicated case. Nevertheless, Picoult ably explores a complex subject with bravado and clarity, and comes up with a heart-wrenching, unexpected plot twist at the book's conclusion. (Apr.) Staff (Reviewed February 16, 2004) (*Publishers Weekly*, vol 251, issue 7, p148)

Reviews: (Continued)

Library Journal Review: Imagine that you were conceived to be the donor of bone marrow and platelets for your older sister, who has a rare form of cancer. Imagine what it would be like to grow up in a family where everyone is constantly aware of one child's deadly illness, so that all decisions must be filtered through what will work for her treatment or her most recent medical emergency. How can a 12-year-old decide against donating a kidney to her older sister? By having this story narrated by each character in turn, Picoult (*Second Glance*) shows readers the dilemmas facing everyone involved: from Anna, the child who sues her parents for medical emancipation; to Sara, the mother who loves all three of her children but must devote continual attention to the daughter with cancer; and to Jesse, the son who has abandoned hope of ever being noticed by his parents. Picoult's timely and compelling novel will appeal to anyone who has thought about the morality of medical decision making and any parent who must balance the needs of different children. Highly recommended. Kim Uden Rutter, Lake Villa Dist. Lib., IL (Reviewed March 15, 2004) (*Library Journal,* vol 129, issue 5, p108)

Kirkus Reviews Picoult's latest chronicle of family travail (*Second Glance*, 2003, etc.) highlights the consequences of deliberately conceiving a child genetically compatible with a mortally ill sibling.

The author vividly evokes the physical and psychic toll a desperately sick child imposes on a family, even a close and loving one like the Fitzgeralds. Picoult's plotting, though, is less sure, as an inherently somber tale morphs into a melodrama with a too-neat twist. Anna Fitzgerald, the 13-year-old who begins the story, was conceived in vitro, and her embryo's genetic makeup closely matched that of her sister Kate. Now 16, Kate was diagnosed at 2 with acute promyelocytic leukemia. In the years that followed she has suffered numerous relapses, despite the infusion of Anna's platelets and bone marrow, even stem cells from her sister's umbilical cord. Their parents, Sara and Brian, now want Anna to give Kate one of her kidneys; compromised by her drastic treatments, Kate's organs are shutting down. Instead, Anna contacts attorney Campbell Alexander and asks him to represent her; she wants her parents to stop using her body to help Kate. Like elder brother Jesse, who's turned his angst into arson and general bad-boy behavior, she has spent her life in the shadow of her sister's illness, one year Kate had to be hospitalized on every holiday. Sara, who has made keeping Kate alive her life's mission, is very angry, but Brian initially takes Anna's side, feeling too much has been asked of her. A hearing is scheduled, though Anna is torn between her affection for Kate and what she feels must be done. As the hearing begins Kate is hospitalized, Jesse's arson is discovered, and Anna initially refuses to testify. There can be no easy outcomes in a tale about individual autonomy clashing with a sibling's right to life, but Picoult thwarts our expectations in unexpected ways.

Despite overplotting, then, a telling portrait of a profoundly stressed family.

(*Kirkus* Reviews, January 15, 2004)